

Mech 2001

Chapter 2001 Insiders vs Outsiders

"I have to say, boss, you're positively glowing." Gavin smirked at Ves as they started their daily briefing. "Did you finally graduate from a boy to a man?"

Ves, with half of his mind lingering on the unforgettable night, snapped back. "What are you talking about? I've always been a man!"

"Hehe.. I'm not so sure about that. I think you definitely 'leveled up' since yesterday, though. You look twice as confident as before!"

"Is it that obvious?" Ves groaned.

"The rumors are already spreading throughout the entire fleet! It doesn't help that Gloriana may have said some words that confirm some of the stories. Did your physical augmentations really allow you to..."

"THAT'S ENOUGH!" Ves slammed his palm against his desk, startling Lucky who was dozing off not far away! "Let's keep my private life separate from my professional life, okay?! I expect everyone to be PROFESSIONAL on the job, okay? You can say whatever you want within reason when you are off the clock, but no funny business during work hours, is that clear?"

Gavin awkwardly coughed. "About that. This policy is rather harder to enforce than you think. When your work and your home is in the same place, people tend to get rather.. cozy. People need to loosen up every now and then, especially when they can't go to a park or head downtown to have some fun. The situation in the fleet is rather steady so far, but the moment you try to instill military discipline among your ranks, I think the mood will quickly tank."

That was a very clever diversion. Ves worried about this problem as well. "How bad is the discipline problem?"

"It's under control. Right now, cohesion among your Larkinsons and workers is high, and morale is rising especially now that it looks like every worker in the fleet is about to get inducted in the Larkinson Clan!"

Gavin was positively grinning when he said those last words!

"Are you that eager to become a Larkinson?" Ves threw a suspicious glance at his assistant.

"I've been working for you since the start back when we were just starting off at Cloudy Curtain. I have been through almost all of your travels and adventures and while I'm not

comfortable with how you attract so much danger, I have to say that I feel more fulfilled than I would have ever been if I worked for a regular company. Everyone who has stuck by you thinks the same! We really believe you are bigger than the Komodo Star Sector. All of us have made up our minds. The chance to be a part of your clan is something that we have all dreamt of but never dared to voice out loud!"

The assistant sounded like an advocate of Calabast's proposal.

"How popular is the proposal?"

"You can hardly find any Brighter, Ylvainan or other people who want to refuse this option! The Larkinson name is worth its weight in exotics. The reputation of the original Larkinson Family and the rising trajectory of your Larkinson Clan holds an immense attraction to those who don't share your last name. Of course, the opportunity to become an insider and receive the same generous treatment as a trueblood Larkinson is already immensely attractive."

"I'm told that this is not entirely the case. Wasn't there talk of instituting a class system?"

Gavin dropped his smirk a bit. "That's one of the most controversial topics that is still up in the air. A lot of the current Larkinson clansmen are very reluctant about expanding the clan. While the older and wiser among you see the necessity in expanding the clan, they're also the most stubborn about dividing the clan between trueblood Larkinsons and 'external' Larkinsons."

"You sound like you disapprove."

"It's not as much of an integration as we all hope for. It's hard not to feel disappointed if this comes into being. This kind of half-hearted solution is like paying lip service to the intention of including outsiders in the clan. Will the people who weren't born a Larkinson still be able to integrate in the clan when the trueblood clansmen constantly lord over their superiority?"

This sounded like an incredibly thorny problem. There were no perfect solutions at hand. Either the Larkinsons could embrace the outsiders as equals and risk losing control of the clan, or they could maintain an artificial class system that allowed the minority of trueblood Larkinsons to maintain primacy over the others.

Regardless of which solution the Larkinson Clan chose, at least one of the two groups would become dissatisfied. Ves worried that the discontent might become severe enough to tear his new and relatively fragile clan asunder!

"I have an appointment soon with Ovrin and Raymond, right? I'll discuss this issue with the two elders and see if we can keep the outrage to a minimum."

"Whatever you choose, I hope you will do justice for us little guys. We have contributed much if not more than your fellow Larkinsons to your efforts. Remember the days when you wanted nothing to do with the Larkinson Family?"

"Those days are long gone."

"Are they?" Gavin questioned. "Sure, you've attracted a large following of Larkinsons, but they mostly joined later on when you became a Journeyman and showed that you had great potential. Back when you were an Apprentice, your family demanded a fourth of the shares of the LMC for a relatively small sum of money considering your company's future potential."

"What's your point?"

"While I am not trying to say that some of your relatives such as Commander Melkor and Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson haven't been essential, the fact that you share the same blood as them is largely incidental. Their level of contributions don't match the assistance that many of your other relatives have provided. In fact, the fact that there are still a lot of clansmen who want to leave as soon as we reach the Sentinel Kingdom is a sign that many of your fellow Larkinsons aren't as loyal as some of us who have been with you for years!"

How could Ves not see what Gavin was doing? His executive assistant constantly tried to persuade him into accepting outsiders into the clan without treating them differently from any other Larkinson.

To be honest, Gavin made a very persuasive argument. Ves half-suspected that he didn't really come up with it to begin with. It sounded like something Calabast or James would come up with. The logic was hard to deny.

"Let's end this topic for now. I won't make up my mind until I talk to some of the Larkinson elders." Ves dismissively waved his hand. "What's next on the agenda?"

"Well, it's about our financial situation. You see, with our best-selling product line no longer being sold in Coalition-aligned space, our monthly income has dropped, but is still more than enough to pay for the upkeep of our sprawling fleet and company assets. Now that we took in the Penitent Sisters, that has changed."

Ves frowned. "How bad is it? Will we be running out of money quickly?"

"Don't get me wrong, boss. The Penitent Sisters, despite their ugly origins, have made us feel a lot safer. The problem is their strength comes at a considerable cost. Second-class outfits are completely different from third-class outfits. The cost to maintain our original lineup of ships and mechs is only a fraction of the cost to keep the highly-advanced hardware of the Penitent Sisters running! Their fuel is more expensive, the energy they consume is astronomically higher, the materials needed to build

replacement parts is prohibitive, the salaries owed to the Sisters is enough to employ an army of third-class mech pilots and worst of all, the costs will only rise as time goes by. According to the Accounting Department, if the current trend persists, we'll run out of money in fifteen months!"

Fifteen months. That didn't sound so bad. "There's plenty of time to remedy this problem."

"This is a big problem!" Gavin threw up his hands. "Fifteen months may be a long time, but our margin of error is not as big as it seems! Even if your striker mech project ends up a commercial success, it's still a third-class mech! We will need to sell a huge amount of copies in order to cover all of the upkeep of the Penitent Sisters! If the sales of your next commercial product falls short of this high bar, then we'll still be drowning in a couple of years!"

"I'll just design another commercial mech, then." Ves shrugged. "Gloriana and I work faster and more productively ever since I got my new implant. If necessary, I'll design a commercial second-class mech in order to generate the revenue we need to pay for all of our expenses."

"I hope you keep this priority in mind. None of us want your endeavor to crash because you haven't been paying attention to our growing expenses. Don't forget that you will have to earn even more money in order to prepare your expeditionary fleet. I doubt we would be able to make it in the Red Ocean with our shabby light carriers."

"You've made your point." Ves said dryly. "When it comes down to it, I can still borrow money from somewhere. The Wodin Dynasty is probably flush with cash."

Gavin smiled sharply at Ves. "Do you want to owe more favors to the Hexers?"

"..Not really."

His debt to DIVA and the inclusion of the Penitent Sisters reminded Ves that he was getting way too involved with the Hegemony! Though he couldn't help it on account of his girlfriend, Ves couldn't wait to repay what he owed and leave the Komodo Star Sector as fast as possible!

They soon turned to the last topic on the agenda.

"You recently instructed us to explore the option of recruiting additional mech designers. While the conditions you've set are very harsh, interest in joining your design teams is still high! In fact, every time we present the option, a lot of mech designers, young and old, are very enthusiastic about working under a rising superstar in the mech industry!"

"I see. My fame has finally reached this level."

"Even though you're known as an eccentric and volatile Journeyman who gets into a lot of trouble, your design talent is undeniable. A lot of Novices, Apprentices and even your fellow Journeymen are interested in working for you. They all hope to learn some of the secrets of your success."

Ves crossed his arms. "Let me guess. They just want to stick with me for a decade or so before leaving to set up their own business with the lessons they learned from me? I already told you that I'm not interested in those who aren't committed to my ventures."

"While that is certainly the case for many mech designers, there are thousands of professionals in the Sentinel Kingdom who have shown a lot of willingness to abide by the restrictive contract you've insisted upon! Many of these mech designers are quite good!"

"That remains to be seen. Try and register all of the applicants. Filter out the ones who aren't suitable as much as possible. When we reach the Sentinel Kingdom, I'll interview the ones who are left on the list in person. I'm looking to double the number of design teams, so that means I want to come away with at least twelve more assistant mech designers."

"Got it, boss." Gavin made a note in his data pad. "Our men in Sentinel will make sure to give you plenty of choice without wasting your time with unqualified applicants. What priorities should they look out for in a potential new recruit?"

"Loyalty comes first. My mech designers must be trustworthy and reliable. It is best that they do not have any loyalties to any prior employers or other groups. Experience is not a necessity for that reason. Ideally, the mech designers should be young so I can get a lot of use out of them before they reach their expiration dates. Ideally, they should be talented or possess a lot of potential, but I don't want anyone greedy or arrogant. If they can't accept being subordinate to me, then they're applying for the wrong job."

His assistant nodded again and again. "That's a hefty set of priorities. I don't think there will be a lot of applicants left if you insist on all of these requirements."

"While I am in need of more assistants in the design lab, it's not too urgent. We can always recruit suitable mech designers elsewhere."

Trust was hard to come by. Ves did not believe that every applicant would be as committed to him as his current roster of mech designers.

That was okay. The galaxy was filled with mech designers. Ves just had to keep his doors open long enough to meet his growing design needs!

Chapter 2002 Upgrading People

"Hihihi! Do you think Ves..."

"Oh, that must have been dreadful! Can you imagine..."

"...Genetic modification has gone too far!"

The gossip in the design lab sounded anything but amusing to Ves. His girlfriend simply couldn't keep her mouth shut to the female members of their design teams. It was as if they were back in high school instead of a professional setting!

Ves glowered more and more as Gloriana jubilantly referenced the 'adventure' they went through last night!

"Meow?"

Lucky curiously floated in front of his face.

"Hey, at least I got some action, unless you!"

"Meow!"

Right now, Ves stood outside the hatch leading into the design lab and workshop compartment. The reason why he paused here was because he wanted to find out whether Gloriana and the others in the fleet were truly gossiping about last night's 'adventure'.

He didn't listen in on the conversation in the design lab by patching into the monitoring system.

Instead, he resorted to a more covert means and extended his spiritual ear through the bulkheads.

What he found out did not amuse him the slightest!

He could understand it if other people gossiped about his love life. With how much his life was being scrutinized by everyone, it was hard to keep everything secret.

Yet for Gloriana to release teasing hints about his 'performance' made him feel extremely embarrassed! Didn't she have any shame?!

"Probably not." He sardonically muttered.

The only consolation was that his girlfriend sounded very satisfied. At least he made a good accounting for himself, if Gloriana was to be believed!

The moment Ves entered the design lab, all conversation stopped. Gloriana smiled at his appearance while the rest of his assistants and students adopted odd expressions.

It was hard not to maintain his composure amidst all of this intense scrutiny. Ves really wanted to bonk Gloriana's head for being too loose with her mouth!

"Ahem." Ves coughed. "We have a lot of work to do. What are you standing around for? We have two mech designs that need fleshing out!"

The assistant mech designers gradually returned to work after Ves handed out their daily assignments. There was a lot more work to do now they started work on designing the Hexer mech.

With the striker mech design project well underway, everyone had to deal with the stress of juggling two very different mech designs at the same time!

The striker mech design project wasn't all that challenging, actually. Its relative simplicity was only marred by the fact that Ves and Gloriana had very few ways to solve its fundamental capacity problems.

Aside from this sore point, the pair could pretty much design the mech to completion on autopilot. At their level of knowledge and experience, designing mass-market third-class mechs posed no significant challenge to them anymore.

Of course, if they wanted to excel in third-class mech design, they needed to put in a lot of work to surpass the greatest names in this sector.

That required a high mastery in third-class mechs as well as centuries of experience in designing them! Such an extreme level of accumulation was not something that a young pair of Journeyman Mech Designers could pick up in a few years or decades!

Ves could only work towards that height step-by-step as he focused on his own progression. He had already decided to shift his focus towards designing second-class mechs, so it was unlikely that he would be able to match the true specialists who spent centuries to polish their ability to design cheap and extremely cost-effective mechs!

After Ves inspected the coursework of the male Larkinson seeds, he finally managed to catch his girlfriend by herself.

"Gloriana." Ves said with gritted teeth.

"Yes, honey?"

Her brilliant smile and her refreshing scent made it hard for him to remain angry with her. He still felt she violated his privacy, though.

"Could you please not make our lives a spectacle? Our relationship is not a public drama show!"

"Oh, Ves." She approached him and embraced him in a heartfelt hug. "You don't have to be so shy. You 'men' like to brag, do you not?"

"Not all men are the same! And why does it sound strange when you say that word?!"

"That's not important." She pulled back and adopted a lecturing tone. "Look Ves, you're a public figure now. You are the owner and lead designer of the LMC as well as the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan. Do you know what that means?"

"No." Ves cluelessly replied.

"You're starting a new lineage, Ves! I've studied the history of my own dynasty as well as the other dynasties of the Hegemony, and each of them came into power when a successful Hexer managed to translate her momentary fortune into enduring strength! Even when the original founders passed on, their legacy lives on through the dynasties they founded!"

"What does this have to do with our relationship?"

She sighed. "You're not getting it. Aren't you the kind of leader who makes a lot of long-term plans and likes to prepare measures early so that they will bear fruit decades from now? This is exactly what I'm doing right now! I'm reassuring your fellow clansmen and dependents that we are working towards our continuity!"

It took awhile for Ves to process the implications behind her words. Even with his Archimedes Rubal, he was still caught off-guard by her intentions!

"You are talking as if we're establishing our own dynasty!"

She nodded. "Isn't that natural? A lot of people are following you because you are talented and capable, but what happens when you get sick? What happens if one of your many adventures goes wrong? Many people in the fleet can't help but worry what will happen if you are indisposed for one reason or another. The month-long coma you've been under recently has caused a lot of fright among your subordinates."

"That doesn't mean we should adopt outdated feudal customs and work towards establishing our own dynasty!"

"You're mistaken if you think these measures are part of an outdated tradition. The founding families of the Bright Republic, the noble houses of the Vesia Kingdom and the matriarchal dynasties of my home state have all grown strong and enduring due to emphasizing continuity! If you want your legacy to last beyond the prime of our lives, then we should start our planning today!"

Ves was way too uncomfortable with this topic! "It's too soon!"

"Is it?" She threw a sly smile at him. "You weren't so reluctant last night. I must say, do you ever run out of energy? You could power an entire mech with your energy reserves!"

"OKAY, that's enough! Let's stay professional, shall we? You may be my girlfriend, but right now you are a co-worker, nothing more!"

"Hihihi! You're so cute!"

BONK!

"Okay, okay, I'll cut it out!" She whined.

Once she had her fun, they began to discuss their latest project. Now that Ves received the remnant of the Idol of the Superior Mother, they were able to proceed with designing their first Hexer mech.

"This mech will be different from the other mechs we've designed." He began and projected a rough draft of his revised vision. "I have a good idea on what I would like to design, but I'm not too certain about the execution. I've never designed a fully-fledged second-class mech before. Most notably, I'm not well-versed with the capabilities of intended users I'm not that familiar with all of the advanced Hexer components that we are allowed to incorporate in our mech design."

"I can make up for both." Gloriana confidently stated. "That said, it would help if you put some extra effort into catching up. Second-class mech design is an entirely different beast from third-class mech design. In fact, it is very hard to design a technically sound mech at this level that can match the quality of other products designed by established competitors. Most notably, our design team can't contribute as much to this project as they do in other projects. The components, materials, scientific principles are on a completely different level. Unless they learn how to design second-class mechs like you did, they can only be entrusted with the most basic tasks."

That was a very serious problem. Hiring third-class mech designers was cheap and easy, but Ves basically got what he paid for! Miles Tovar, Oscar DiMartin, Mayer Torto and Merrill O'Brian were all third-class mech designers! Their exposure to the advanced technology and design principles of second-class mech designs was fairly modest!

If not for their ability to peruse the textbooks of Clarion University, they would have probably remained completely ignorant!

Hiring additional third-class mech designers didn't address this problem. Their quality was too low to be of any use in projects that had reached this level of complexity.

"We should hire some second-class mech designers." Gloriana suggested. "Let me reach out to my old alma mater."

Ves immediately shook his head. "No! Don't think about it! We are not hiring Hexers, especially for something as important as our design teams!"

"What's your problem, Ves?!"

"Will they listen to my orders or will they only listen to you instead?"

"Not every Hexer is the same! We can hire males instead of females if you are so insecure about maintaining your authority!"

"That's hardly any better!"

They eventually shelved this option.

"I don't want too many weirdos on my design teams." He declared. "While our design efforts are hampered by the lack of second-class mech designers, you shouldn't count out our current assistants. They're improving every day and we can encourage them to transition into second-class mech designers."

"That will take years! They don't have your implant or your cognitive augmentations! Time spent on learning how to design second-class mechs eats up valuable time they could use to progress their design philosophy. This is one of the biggest reasons why they are reluctant to promote. They will be older and further behind compared to those who have designed second-class mechs from the beginning."

That was true. Ves recognized the issues that this measure might bring.

"We'll just have to provide them with the opportunity to augment themselves." He said. "They won't need to waste as much time when their learning efficiency improves. I'll have to make sure they're committed to their jobs and in it for the long haul, though."

These days, Ves no longer handed out his Attribute Candies willy nilly.

In fact, aside from Ketis, his decision to feed his employees with candies seemed to have backfired! Two people he valued turned their backs on him despite showering them with a lavish gift in the form of improving their intellect!

That said, there were many other ways to augment someone's intelligence.

"Dr. Ranya should be available, right?" He asked.

Gloriana nodded. "Yes. Ever since she supervised your recovery, she turned her attention back to her own research."

"Well, I'm short of an exobiologist and medical advisor, so I suppose she has to fulfill this function now. Please tell her to form a plan to augment every member of our design

teams. Our assistants could all use the extra assistance with all of the improvements they have to make in order to remain relevant."

"I'll do that, but it will take some time. I think there are plenty of geneticists in your employ that can upgrade their genes. My cousin can install cranial implants in their heads. Together, that should result in a very comprehensive boost to their cognitive functions."

"Don't make it too cheap. I want to invest in them. Ideally, the augmentations should be the same as the ones that Hexers are entitled to. Is that possible?"

His girlfriend furrowed her brows. "That's harder to do. We probably have to hire additional specialists, especially geneticists. They won't come cheap, and the advanced augmentations themselves will also cost a lot."

"We have to hire those people sooner than later, so we might as well do it now. A lot more people will require augmentation as well and it's best if we can perform the operations in-house rather than rely on others."

"Are you okay with hiring Hexer personnel?"

"NO!"